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ABSTRACT

Many colleges and universities lack a comprehensive, fully integrated marketing plan to combat high attrition rates in programs offered to non-traditional students. A clear understanding of the needs of the marketplace is crucial to an effective marketing program. Research suggests that life transitions are what motivate adults to pursue education, that some non-traditional students report holding false expectations about college, and that non-traditional students decide to return to college and decide on a particular college at the same time. Barriers to success of nontraditional students include: sex and age quotas; financial aid practices; regulations; deficiencies in curriculum planning; and faculty and staff attitudes. Direct, specific recruitment seems to meet the needs of a population in search of retraining and may help universities face the realities of a stable or decreasing traditional population pool. Institutions can be placed in one of three stages: (1) laissez-faire (characterized by removal of barriers or constraints on adults); (2) separatist (adults given separate specially developed programs); and (3) equity (active recruitment of adult learners, a fully integrated curriculum, and services available evenings and weekends). A realistic awareness of the diversity of non-traditional students and what it means for the quality of the institution and the traditional student body is essential for marketing success. Educational institutions must learn to serve the students they now have and could have, not continue in ways that served those students they once had. (RS)

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DIFFERENCES DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

by

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In this presentation I pan to leave you with three messages:

1. Heighten your awareness of our future so that you seek answers to questions such as: Who will our students be by the year 2000? What skills will they possess? What needed experiential and cognitive skills will be absent?
2. Review with you the needs and the barriers to success of non-traditional students in colleges.
3. Finally, present to you some ideas on culture specific recruitment strategies for non-traditional students.

In face of declining enrollments, college administrators seek ways to attract non-traditional students. The population of this group, according to national statistics, has been increasing steadily in size. From 1970 to 1990, the number of part-time undergraduate students more than doubled, from 2.1 million to almost 5 million (O'Brien, 1992). By comparison, full-time enrollment rose by about one-third, climbing from 5.3 million in 1970 to 7 million in 1990. Two groups have contributed to this increase: The growing numbers of students who work and students older than the "traditional" college age (18-24). In 1991, two thirds of part-time students were employed, and only one out of four part-time students fell in the traditional age range. Projections indicate that the number of part-time undergraduates will continue to increase. The question still remains: are the needs and expectations of these non-traditional students being satisfied by the current offerings at Universities? Furthermore, with a clear understanding of these needs can additional demand be stimulated by a specifically targeted marketing program?

High attrition rate in the programs already offered to the adult segment demonstrates the lack of coordinated effort on the part of universities to understand the educational needs and wants to this particular segment. The lack of a comprehensive, fully integrated marketing plan seems to be most prevalent in many of the colleges. The non-traditional students are older, their schedules are busier and their needs are more diverse than those of their counterparts a decade ago.

Needs of Non-Traditional Students

A clear understanding of the needs of the marketplace is crucial to an effective marketing program (Kotler, 1984). Much research has been conducted to determine the characteristics of the traditional student which predict choice:

1. socioeconomic status of parents,
2. proximity to colleges,
3. parental encouragement,
4. level of aspiration before and during high school, and
5. level of ability as measured by standardized scores (Bers & Smith, 1992).

While this is interesting information for colleges to have, it does not appear to be particularly relevant to the choices made by older students. Aslanian and Brickel (1980) suggest that life transitions such as retirement, divorce, children leaving home, or a new job are what motivate adults to pursue education. One needs to know the attitudes and orientations of non-traditional students in order to develop successful recruitment strategies. As presented in the study by Hu (1985) the following reasons were reported, in order of importance, by non-traditional students for returning to school:

Important Reasons for Returning to School

1. Need Academic Credentials for Career Advancement
2. For Career Change
3. Life Transitions
4. Currently Unemployed and Need for Future Employment Opportunity
5. For Education Sake
6. Required for Current Employment
7. For Expanding Social Activities

In Bers & Smith (1992) study, women, who represent almost half of college students (O' Connor, 1985), frequently cited divorce or widowhood, or children going off to school or leaving home, as key events prompting them to return to school. By the way, women over 35 are the fastest growing student group in college campuses. Men were more likely to cite job related factors: job changes or the need to obtain additional training. Personal and family related reasons were not identified as critical factors for men.

Important Reasons For **Not** Returning to School

1. Do Not Have Time
2. Just Not Interested
3. Tuition Fee Too High
4. Do Not Need More Education
5. Living Too Far From College
6. Admission Standards Too High

Some non-traditional students reported that they held false expectations about college, particularly about the amount and kind of academic work required. Women expressed lack of confidence in their abilities both to succeed in college and to successfully compete against younger students. If men had such doubts about their abilities they did not reveal them. Women reported, however, that they were initially concerned about:

1. the difficulty of college work,
2. the competition from younger students whom they felt were more accustomed to academics,
3. the amount of time they had been away from school, and
4. their ability to meet the challenge of college.

The community college offered a "safer" environment for many women students. Their decision was not based on the perception that the community college would be less academically challenging. The community college was felt to be "safer" because it allowed those students to focus on academics without incurring high tuition costs or long, uncomfortable commuting periods. Low cost, ease of getting to and from school, and the ability to incorporate school into regular routines minimized the burden of being a student.

One of the surprising findings in the Bers & Smith (1992) article was that students did not report engaging in any of the sequential search processes and decision activities suggested by the college-choice literature. Non-traditional students collapsed the search and choice phases into one step: deciding to return to college and deciding on a particular college at the same time. The two factors that appear to influence their choice were convenience and affordable cost. Respondents were also asked to evaluate a list of considerations in deciding in which college to enroll:

Determinants of decision to enroll in a particular college

1. High Quality Professors
2. Excellent Academic Reputation
3. Flexibility of Program Offerings and Requirements
4. Availability of Evening Classes
5. Easy to Commute from Work or Home
6. Safe Campus
7. Top Quality Program of Study
8. Numerous Course Offerings
9. Availability of Campus Parking Space
10. Low Tuition
11. Courses Are Oriented to Meet Current Job Market Demand

Barriers to success of non-traditional students

There are many barriers to success divided into institutional and situational (O' Connor, 1985):

Institutional barriers

1. sex and age quotas,
2. financial aid practices,
3. regulations,
4. deficiencies in curriculum planning,
5. insufficient student personnel services,
6. faculty and staff attitudes,
7. discrimination against part-time students, and
8. a virtual lack of financial support for the part-time student.

Institutional practices concerning course offerings may make little or no effort at becoming flexible, i.e., there seem to be few attempts to systematically examine scheduling and course cycles over time in order to provide availability for the part-time student. Time limits on course or degree requirements are often a hindrance to the returning part-time student as are the schedules and the locations of the courses. This is particularly true of evening students. Offices of counseling, career planning and placement, advisement, financial aid, book stores, and some libraries are often open at hours scheduled for staff, rather that for student, convenience.

Situational or social barriers

These are likely to arise from the social class and ethnic or racial group to which the returning student belongs. For example, fewer women from lower socioeconomic groups are likely to participate in post-secondary education. With the exception of black women, the college attendance rate of minority women is under that of males of all ethnic groups and of white females. There seems to be lower expectations for women, in general, and for women of minority groups specifically, to continue their education.

The process of actively recruiting adult learners

Colleges and universities are discovering the power of actively advertising for this population. Directed, specific recruitment seems to meet the needs of a population in search of retraining and may also help universities face the realities of a now stable or decreasing traditional population pool. Media often used for recruitment include newspapers, television, and radio advertisements. The scheduling of more and more classes during the evening hours and at places and times more convenient to an older, off-campus population speaks to an awareness of the need to make education more accessible to this group.

Several criticisms seem to exist, voiced by traditional educators who seem to believe that this flexibility will result in the development of an over-credentialed society, and that through liberal policies of conferring credits universities compromise academic standards. Institutions seem to be criticized for being more interested in survival by the recruitment of adults, rather than in serving the learning needs of the adult student once they have been recruited.

Institutions can be placed in one of three stages according to Astone & Nunez-Wormack (1990). You may want to think where your institution falls in this categorization:

The **Laissez-Faire Stage**--This stage is characterized by a simple removal of any barriers or artificial constraints on adults (i.e. age requirements, parental consent forms, sex or racial requirements, and an easing of the requirements of years in and out of college).

This system allows adults access to do the best they can within a system that works neither for nor against them. Adults are allowed to be as entrepreneurial and aggressive as they wish in dealing with the institution. In the Laissez-Faire stage institutions tend to lack provisions for adult students, i.e.,

--No active recruitment

--No special support services

--No curriculum development efforts especially for adults

There is an overall institutional assumption that student problems are intrinsic to their role as students, not their age, maturity, and/or experiences.

The **Separatist Stage** in which institutions, when faced with an increased and increasing enrollment of adult students, soon realize that age is relevant to student needs. Adults are essentially segregated from the major student body and given separate specially developed programs, usually at different times and locations from the traditional student body and often with a lack of effective support services. These programs are also given a priority and status demonstrably lower that those of traditional programs. Adults become exploited economically and sometimes educationally as well. Fees are not adjusted, the services are weak, if available at all, and there is usually substantially less general funding support that given to programs for younger students. Other characteristics of this stage include:

--A clearly segregated and identified adult or evening program.

--A separate or part-time faculty for this evening unit consisting primarily of adjunct or part-time faculty and some regular faculty.

--Limited or tightly controlled opportunities for evening students to take day classes and for day students to take evening classes.

--Different programs and degree requirements for day or regular programs and evening or adult programs.

--Separated and different services for adults.

--Limited non instructional student services for adults.

--Low status for administrators of adult programs granting them limited or no access to university policy-making process.

Finally, the **Equity Stage** has the following characteristics:

--Active recruitment of adult students.

--Appropriate delivery systems for adult learning.

--Fully integrated curriculum.
--Provisions for degree credits for prior learning.
--Administrative services made available by phone, mail, during the evening, and on weekends.
--Academic advising available at hours adults are on campus.
--Personal counseling, financial advising, career counseling, and other student support services available in the evening and responsive to adult problems.
--Senior policy-making bodies of the university aware of adult students.
--Fully empowered adult administrators.
--Administrative policy and practice that is proactive rather than reactive in dealing with adult students, their needs, and their problems.

The success of the integration of the non-traditional student depends on the institution's commitment to improving opportunities for this population. Leadership and involvement of top administrators are fundamental. Ideally, an institution wide effort conceived as a process rather than a program, recruitment and retention of non-traditional students would engage everyone: faculty, administrators, staff and students, in a well-developed and deliberate plan designed to achieve specific and reasonable goals (Astone & Nunez-Wormack, 1990). The plan should be based on a comprehensive institutional audit reflecting the profile and present educational situation of non-traditional students at the institution. It should be cooperatively designed, including the perspectives of those who will implement it, and should delineate the methods and resources designed to achieve its objectives within a stated time. Finally, it should be monitored, evaluated, and periodically modified to reflect changing conditions and to capitalize on aspects that emerge as being particularly successful.

Hopefully, I have given you some specific ideas that you could function as a starting point in the change process at your institution. Non-traditional students, as a group, represent diversity in life situations, goals, skill and styles of learning. A realistic awareness of this diversity and what it means for the quality of the institution and the traditional student body is essential. Educational institutions must learn to serve the students they do and could have, not continue in ways that served those they once had.

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